Using Story Jokes for Real Communication

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Teaching in a monolingual/monocultural, non-English speaking environment can at times be frustrating. You want your students to genuinely communicate with each other in socially acceptable ways, and at the same time become more aware of cultural traits. For the former purpose, the L1 naturally outstrips the L2 in communicative efficiency; and, as regards the latter, the only way cultural experiences unknown to the students can be introduced into the classroom is by the teacher. Even when the explanation of cultural and sociolinguistic skills is explicit, the students are usually left practicing formulaic speech with other members of the class whose reactions are not representative of the L2 speakers and often not even natural. We are quite familiar with stilted dialogues roleplayed by students sounding something like this:

Would you be so kind as to lend me your pen? Yes.
Thank you.

What is needed in a classroom is a reaction that is real because it is spontaneous. This is where jokes and funny stories (see Footnote 1 below) can come in handy. In a classroom setting made up of students from the same linguistic and cultural background, a laugh or a groan is at least a more immediate and sincere response to a speech act than the granting of an invented request or the acceptance of an unowned apology.

Funny stories are part of our linguistic heritage and even follow certain recognized scenarios. "Have you heard the one about the..." is often the opening; and the ending is a laugh, an exaggerated groan, or even an apologetic "I don't get it." Moreover, they are really common mini-narratives, and they are meant to be told over and over again and so lend themselves naturally to rephrasing—a "macro-drill" that students rarely have the opportunity to perform in class.

Warming Up

A good exercise to get the class into the right mood is to begin by telling some "bad jokes" yourself, perhaps the kind of two liners that many joke books include. By helping students realize that not all jokes are going to be funny to all people, you set the scene for their own (sometimes unfunny) performances.

You might then give out a two liner joke to each student and get them to memorize it and then, of course, find a "victim" to tell it to. Emphasize that they should: 1) be serious when they say the first line; 2) hesitate before saying the punch line; and 3) say the punch line in a straightforward way.

Tell them that they should practice their jokes on different members of the class, trying to improve their delivery each time.

Story Jokes

At higher levels, the above activity can be followed up with story jokes.

1. Get a set of 6–12 funny stories, roughly one or two paragraphs in length. These can be found in various magazines (e.g. *The Reader's Digest, English Teaching Forum*, etc.) and textbooks; and even your friends might

^{1.} Here I distinguish between "jokes," which are usually two liners of the "Why did the chicken cross the road?" variety, and "funny stories," which are also commonly called "jokes," but which consist of more extended narrative, drama, repetition, etc.

Reflections

burden you with them upon request. It's best to avoid ethnic, sexual, and political genres, of course. The important thing is that the stories have clear and separable punch lines.

- 2. Write the stories out on slips of paper, *without their respective punch lines*. Don't worry if you have six jokes and twelve students. Just repeat the jokes.
- 3. Write all the respective punch lines out on a sheet of paper.
- 4. Distribute one unfinished story joke to each student. If two students have the same joke, so much the better. This simulates a real life situation when people have heard the same joke.
- 5. Distribute the sheets of punch lines to each student. They have to find the punch line to their own story and then "learn" the joke—whether that means memorizing it or putting it into their own words. They should be careful, however, to retain at least the elements that give the joke its flavor, and perhaps even determine its effect.
- 6. Tell the students to go around the classroom as if they were in a pub, bar, or other social situation. They should approach another student, break the ice with "Have you heard the one about...?" and tell their joke. The other student should just react or say (if he/she doesn't understand) "I don't get it." Hopefully, the joke teller can either repeat the salient parts, the punch line or, if worst comes to worst, explain why the joke is funny. The other student should then try and tell his/her story.

N.B. The students should tell their joke several times to different people in one class. Tell them not to hesitate to change the joke story the second time if they feel that will aid in making the joke more understandable or even funnier.

Conclusion

The value of relating a funny story lies in the commitment required of the student telling it and in the observable and sincere response that he/she elicits from the student who listens to it. Rarely do these elements intrude on the English classroom.

In the telling of a funny story, the commitment resides not with the truth of information being expressed, or even one's adherence to a view point about an issue—the usual kinds of activities in classrooms. Usually these two varieties of commitment lead to obviousness on the one hand or unfair culpability on the other. Telling funny stories makes a student accountable for the success of the speech act itself, i.e. the proof is in the pudding.

Likewise, the responses to a funny story are not programmed by either the student's own culture or that of the teacher. Rather, they are the result of real cultural factors: the sense of humor extent in the L2 culture that may or may not be shared with the L1 culture. They are signaled explicitly by the behavior, not just the word, of the participants.

By the way, there are at least two spin-offs of the above activity: One is that, since all students have the punch lines, they may very well guess the ending of a story—something which, unfortunately happens in real life. The other fall-out is that the students may actually enjoy themselves and someday, in a more realistic setting, be able to entertain another person with their funny stories.

A Funny Story

A woman was walking down the street one day when she happened to see a man holding a monkey.

The woman asked the man, "Where did you find that monkey?"

The man answered, "In the street. Why?"

The woman said, "You should take him to the zoo."

The man said, "That's a good idea."

The next day the woman saw the man with the monkey again. She said, "I thought you were going to take him to the zoo."

The man answered, "Oh, I did, and he really enjoyed it. So today I'm going to take him to the movies."

(The punch line is, in case you have not guessed it, in the last paragraph.)